

HISTORY
OF
DIALS METHODIST
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

1808-1929



By EMMA McSWAIN DIAL

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HISTORY OF DIALS CHURCH


1808-1929

BY EMMA McSWAIN DIAL

READ AT
HOME-COMING DIALS CHURCH
AUGUST 11, 1929



EMMA McSWAIN DIAL



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HISTORY OF DIALS METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Dials Methodist Church, one of the oldest and most distinguished in the Upper South Carolina Conference, was organized by Bishop Frances Asbury in 1808 in the home of Martin Dial. It was called "Dials Methodist Society", and contained the following Thirteen Members:—

Martin Dial and Wife,
Colvill Dial and Wife,
Gideon Thomason and Wife,
Dr. Ebenezer Hammond and Wife,
William McMahan and Wife,
Mrs. William Hellams, Sr.,
Easter Dial and Dinah Wolfe (Negro Slaves).

Many years before the organization of the "Dials Methodist Society" by Bishop Asbury, prayer meetings, and other meetings of a religious nature had been held in the home of Martin Dial, conducted by Martin Dial, Gideon Thomason, Sr., and other noted exhorters of that time.

The Society grew and prospered, developing the spiritual life of the community, holding its religious services in this consecrated home for several years after its organization.

Many of the old preachers and exhorters living in the counties of Greenville and Laurens, or districts as they were called at that time, dated their conversion to the time and place, calling it "Old Jerusalem". Some of them, in after years, often made pilgrimages to this old home, holding a lonely prayer service, kneeling on the sacred spot, where they found Christ.

The first Dials Camp-Meeting was held on the hill-

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side near the Dial home, over-looking the branch and the famous "Dial Spring," just across the branch from the hillside. It was an ideal place for such a meeting—nature's own furnishings.

People came from far and near, some walked miles and miles, some came on horseback, double and triple, and some in wagons.

Nickolas Talley, a young preacher, preached the eleven o'clock sermon to an audience of a thousand people. It was a "red-letter day" in the history of the Dials Methodist Society, and long-to-be remembered by those present on that occasion. In after years, they would recall it, delighting to tell it to their children and grandchildren, making an interesting story of it, not forgetting to tell of the handsome young preacher, who distinguished himself so well on that occasion.

The Society grew so much in numbers, that a larger and more conveniently situated place had to be considered; therefore it was moved on the other side of Rabun Creek, locating it a quarter of a mile from the Dial family graveyard, of which the sacred association had all to do with its location, as Isabel May Hastings Dial, the mother of Martin Dial, and his beloved first wife, Chrystie Abercromby Dial, were buried there.

A one-acre lot was given by Martin Dial, on which was built a log house, which served as a place of worship for many years. Preaching and class-meetings were held there every Sunday, and often during week-days.

The summer-time special meetings were held under a brush arbor. Gleaning from the Dial family record, and the traditional history of the Society, I have found the names of some noted South Carolina preachers of that

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period, who did much of the preaching on these memorable occasions :

David Derrick,
Lovie Pierce,
Durant,
Stacy,
William Capers,
Whiteford,

and many others.

In 1835 the old log "meeting-house", which had done service for a long time was torn down, and another "meeting-house" was built on the same spot. The name "Dials Methodist Society" was at this time changed to "Dials Church" in honor of Martin Dial, who was considered to be the "Father of the Church".

This Church was much larger than the old "log meeting-house". Two more acres of land were added to the former lot on which the log "meeting-house" had stood. The two acres were bought from John L. Harris, Jr., and Gideon Thomason, one being paid for by Martin Dial, the other by Gideon Thomason. The deed to these two acres was made to Thomas A. Brownlee, Reubin Brownlee, William Thomason, Martin Armstrong, Robert Thomason, William Hellams, Sr., and Dr. Ebenezer Hammond, as trustees. This deed was made July 1st, 1835, signed in the presence of Rhoderick Gary and John Hellams.

In 1841 Rev. David Seal held a meeting under a brush arbor near the Church. People came from far and near, bringing their dinners with them, as two sermons were preached a day—one in the forenoon, and one in the afternoon.

Scores of people were converted at that meeting, and a hundred members were added to the Church. Martin

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Dial, at that time, was 97 years old, yet he was able to mount his horse and ride to that meeting, which proved to be the last time he was permitted to worship in his beloved Church. He died in the closing part of the year 1843. Had he lived to see the first day of the year 1844, he would have reached his hundredth mile-stone.

The memory of the "Seal's Big-Meeting" was destined to hold a place in the history of Dials Church for the centuries to come. Long since that time Dials has often been spoken of as "Big Dials".

Glancing back over her past history we might well say that this bigness had its origin at the "Seal's Big-Meeting" as that meeting has always been called.

In the year 1860, the church of 1835, which had done service for a quarter of a century, was moved away, and the present church was built on the same old-time-honored spot. The building committee at that time being:

John S. Dial,
Gideon Yeargin,
Robert A. Gray,
James H. Shell,
Wilborn Curry,
G. W. Leak.

W. T. Terry, J. W. Terry and B. Y. Jones were the builders.

The building, the present Dials Church, complete with all the furnishings, cost only one thousand seven hundred and twenty-four dollars (\$1,724.00). More than half of that sum was given by seven or eight members. "Uncle Johnnie Owings", as he was affectionately called, and his three sons, Rapley, Creswell and Samuel, gave four hundred dollars, the largest sum coming from any one family; James H. Shell gave two hundred, the largest amount given by one man. Two or three others gave over

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a hundred each, while the remaining part was given in smaller contributions.

In looking over the original contract containing the plan of the present church, I find this interesting paragraph, which I am herein giving a place in this history—quoting exactly:

“16 ft. of the house cut off for negro slaves by a ceiled partition 3 ft. high, pulpit to be in the center of the house, joining the partition for the blacks. Pulpit to be of fashionable style. Altar to be 10 ft. in diameter, circular, raised 4 inches from the floor, banistered round 18 inches, high pulpit and altar to be painted mahogany color.”

Note the changes which have been made since then. They were made in 1897. Also, at the same time, new seats were placed in the church, and later new windows, the present ones.

The present church has been well taken care of by her members in the past as well as the present. Going back to her first organization by Bishop Frances Asbury in 1808, we find her recorded age to be 121 years.

The old home of Martin Dial, the first “Meeting-house” or church, which was destroyed by fire eight months ago, was more than 160 years old. It was built of oak logs a foot in diameter, hewn on one side and pinned together with home-made iron pins. Much of the bark was still on some of the logs when the “Old Jerusalem” went down in ashes, while the smoke ascended heavenward, like incense from her sacred altar.

In this write-up of the past history of Dials Church, it is but just and fitting that a special tribute of loving memories and appreciative expressions be given to the benefactors and preservers of the church, whose official

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duties have done so much for her on-going spiritual progress for the past 69 years:

John S. Dial, grandson of the sainted Martin Dial,
Gideon Yeargin,
Robert A. Gray,
John R. Switzer,

and many others, who served as stewards and trustees deserve honorable mention in this sketch.

John S. Dial was a steward for 38 years and a trustee for 60 years.

Gideon Yeargin, Robert A. Gray and John R. Switzer were contemporary with him for more than twenty-five years. One of Laurens County's noted writers said: "The Religion of Robert A. Gray, Gideon Yeargin and John S. Dial would do to live and die by."

Robert A. Gray was superintendent of Dials Sunday School for many years. He might truly be called the "father" of it, as its most noticeable progress began under his administration. He was gentle, unassuming and unselfish, if possible, to a fault, yet a powerful leader. He was a man of inspiration and action, "mighty in prayer and faith". He could put over and finance any problem, or proposition, coming up either in Church, Sunday School or community activities. He was one of the wealthiest men in the community and one of the most liberal, which gave much prestige to him as a leader in every benevolent proposition to be considered. When he said, "Brethren, let's put our hands deep down in our pockets," suiting the action to his words, all hands went down, and the money came up. He moved to Williamston in 1880, which was a long-felt loss to Dials Church and community. He was a moving spirit in the church and community in the town of Williamston, yet his love for "Old Dials", as he

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called it, reigned supreme in his heart as long as he lived. His dying request was that his body should be carried back to Dials and buried in the cemetery there, which was done. Such loyalty and devotion is truly deserving of a page ascribed to his memory in this history of the church he loved so much.

We must not forget to insert another page in this history to the memory of W. Collier Curry, who "passed over the river" a few months ago. It might be said of him, "This was the noblest Roman of them all". He was superintendent of Dials Sunday School for 40 years, and a trustee and steward of the church for more than a quarter of a century. The Sunday School grew and prospered under his administration. He was faithful and true in every undertaking looking to the interest of the church and Sunday School. He was a wonderful shepherd; "knew his sheep by name, and they knew his voice". He was a loving shepherd, ever looking after his flock and their housing. His influence will extend far down the centuries to come; his name will ever call up tender memories in the minds of all who were so fortunate as to come under his benign influence.

It can truly be said of all the herein-mentioned benefactors, and many others whose names are not mentioned in this history, that they were faithful to the trust placed in them by their fellow man, and faithful to their "high calling in Jesus Christ". The record of their stewardship is on file in the Archives of Heaven awaiting the final consideration.

In this looking-back, and the following-up of the years of this venerable institution, comprising nearly all of the nineteenth century and more than one-fourth of this, the twentieth century, we have been stepping into

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the by-gone age of our State and county, as well as the community life of "Old Dials", of whom, it can truly be said, that this Sanctuary of God has contributed no small part to the growth and development of Laurens County and Dials community. All of her one hundred and twenty-one years are associated, not only with their most eventful periods, but they are interwoven with their finest character growth. Dark times fell athwart their pathway; fire and sword and sorrows innumerable tested her people; but her altars gleamed ever undimmed and her faith knew no wavering. Ours would be a different and less admirable community today, had there not been founded in 1808 that house of worship and Christian work, which we know as "Dials Methodist Society", organized by Bishop Asbury with the Thirteen members—the little Band of Missionaries, full of that life-giving, vitalizing fire of God's Holy Spirit—the Thirteen Pillars of Dials Church, and on this foundation of courage and faith rests not only her spiritual growth and divinely directed progress in the past, but her rising prosperity of today.

Dials Church has ever been a missionary church. She mothers seven churches—all of them an honor to her. Many distinguished preachers of the past and the present, date their divine calling back to the influence of this aged mother-church. Several times in her past the church roll contained more than four hundred members, while often in those by-gone years the Sunday School has enrolled one hundred and seventy-five pupils, with a corps of consecrated teachers unsurpassed by any of the present day.

The Sunday School at this time numbers one hundred and seventy-five, and is still moving onward, as it were, in "leaps and bounds" under the efficient leadership

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of Festus T. Curry, superintendent, upon whom the mantle of his sainted father has fallen.

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of Dials Church was organized in 1893 with a membership of twenty-five, of whom it can be said, they wrought well in the work of missions. A native itinerant Korean Missionary, a girl in the Laura Hagood School in China, and a boy in a Korean school could bear testimony to a year's work and a year's training financed by one of those charter members.

The society, thirty-six years old, is still engaged in active service for the on-going progress of missions.

The Epworth League, the social department of the church, organized twelve years ago, has meant a new enlistment of interest, as well as a distinct spiritual gain to the church.

Before closing this unique history of Dials Church, a few more pages should be added giving the interesting record of the wonderful improvements that have recently been given to the church, the church grounds and cemetery.

The changing times in which we live have brought to the modern church newer needs, but it has in no way modified our desire for a place to worship God in an atmosphere of uplifting and reverent beauty. The spirituality of beauty is a phrase needing no explanation. "Art and religion have obtained their greatest height when they have ministered to each other." This statement needs no demonstration, yet, it has been beautifully verified in the carrying-out or the functioning of the herein recorded improvements: The zealous interest on the part of all the church members, the manifestation of their appreciation of beauty, together with their harmoniously combined efforts in bringing it about, have proven it to be

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an aid and an incentive to higher living, "Where beauty lives, there God must dwell."

We begin with the cemetery as it appears today—a transformation of "Beauty out of Chaos", the materialized vision of Mrs. Nettie Curry Blackwell, the wife of Dr. D. J. Blackwell of Quincy, Florida. While on a visit to her parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Curry in the summer of 1928, she conceived the idea of beautifying "God's Acre". She planned the undertaking, and with her charming personality, rarely-to-be-found executive ability and prowess, backed up by the untiring energy and work of her father, the loyalty of D. D. Harris and others, "she put it through". Liberal contributions came in from near and far. Friends as well as interested families sent generous contributions of money, while many gave work. Honorable mention is due to Mrs. Blackwell, Mrs. Popie Curry, Mr. Festus Curry and Mr. Langdon Brooks, as the largest individual contributors of money toward the financing of the achievement. Honor and appreciative commendations are due to every contributor either of money or work in helping to bring to pass the fulfilment of Mrs. Blackwell's dream of beautifying "God's Acre", which stands today as a Twentieth Century Monument of their loyalty and devotion.

Following the cemetery transformation, we herein record the wonderful improvements of the church and church grounds, made during the spring of the present year, 1929.

The moving spirit in this enterprise was Rev. J. L. Singleton, pastor of the church, a man born to lead, and to execute the seemingly impossible. With his marvelous engineering skill, he launched the undertaking: painting of the church inside and out, together with other much

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needed improvements, and the beautifying of the church grounds; in that the whole might be in keeping with the beauty of the cemetery. The cemetery transformation of 1928 had left an illuminating inspiration and appreciation of beauty, not only in the minds and hearts of the church members, but in the minds and hearts of the whole community; so when the proposition of the church improvement and the beautifying of the grounds was presented to them by their pastor, their enthusiasm went, as it were, "sky-high", resulting in liberal contributions of money, material, and freely given work to finance it. The church was painted inside and out, furniture polished and dusted. Even the ladies of the church and community scrubbed, painted, wielded the hoe and mattock, contributed flowers, and planted them with own hands. It was a happy organized band of workers with an untiring leader in the person of their pastor, who was always first on the ground, and the last one to leave. The artistic arrangement of the grounds, so in keeping with the time-honored setting of the church, was a product of his genius. He is truly deserving of the highest honors to be given in this write-up of the recent improvements of our church and her surroundings; for to him we are indebted, to the largest extent, for the consummation of the whole.

Mr. Festus T. Curry, who is noted for his liberal giving to all benevolent purposes, is due honorable mention as being the largest contributor of money, material and hired labor, and at the same time, the most enthusiastic booster and collector of funds and material toward the financing of the expenses.

The attractive inscription, "Dials Methodist Episcopal Church—1808", above the front entrance to the church was conceived and financed by him. The conception is beautiful and alluring. The age-old church, perched

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up on her magnificent setting, in that "garden of the Lord", a wayside pulpit, sending out a message to be read by the passers-by, who do not have time to stop and enter this house of God; to them it preaches a gospel of beauty and good will, the true gospel of Christ.

Honorable mention is also due to Mrs. Popie Curry, who gave the beautiful urns at the front entrance, as well as a generous contribution of money and material. Every one who helped in any way in these improvements is deserving of honorable mention and a worthy bestowal of praise; for it was a joyous, freely given service, a manifestation of loyalty and love for the church of their fathers, who lived in the shadows of the nineteenth century.

Summing up all these improvements, beginning with the cemetery, following with the church and grounds, viewing them all together in their transformed beauty today—they seem "a little bit of Heaven come down to earth", a vision of soul-stirring truth and beauty extending to all, who enter, a perpetual invitation to walk humbly before God, and serve Him in the beauty of holiness, for God is Beauty.

Another item of importance to be recorded in this history of Dials Church is the erection of the Memorial Tablet which occupies the place in the back part of the recess overlooking the sacred desk.

This tablet is the conception and gift of Emma McSwain Dial, the great-granddaughter of Martin Dial.

The Memorial Tablet contains the following inscription:—

IN MEMORIAM

Martin Dial, Father of Dials Church,
organized in his home by Bishop Frances

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Asbury in 1808, under the name of "Dials Methodist Society" with the following

Thirteen Members:

Martin Dial and Wife,

Colvill Dial and Wife,

Gideon Thomason and Wife,

William McMahan and Wife,

Dr. Ebenezer Hammond and Wife,

Mrs. William Hellams, Sr.,

Dinah Wolfe and Easter Dial (Negro Slaves).

This tablet, the constitutive link of loving interest and hallowed memories, connecting the past with the present, in itself contains a history any church or community might be proud of. The age-old organization by the most distinguished Bishop of Southern Methodism, in that pioneer home whose walls stood the tempest and sunshine for more than one hundred and sixty years.

Some one has said that "History is philosophy teaching by example, but Church history is God teaching by example". If that be true, then, this history of Dials Church, which has been so full of spiritual food, and divinely directed fulfillment to be read by the present and future generations, will be to them a stimulant of church-loyalty, a faith-strengthening and appealing enthusiasm, teaching them to be proud of her glorious past, to which they owe the strength of the present and the hope and glory of a vitalized future. It is but a natural heritage from a generation of godly parents, whose lives were full of Life's Gathered Immortelles; lives full of beauty and truth all interwoven in this history of her past.

I would not, if I could, draw any distinction between the noble men and women connected with this church in the past, but would point with pride to all the arduous labors of those who have worked so faithfully in this part

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of the Master's vineyard, and have passed to higher service above. I pray that a double portion of their spirit may rest upon the generation now bearing the heat and burden of the day.

I would that the "to-be-continued" history of Dials Church, covering another one hundred and twenty-one years, extending far into the twenty-first century, should be as rich in abiding values as the one hundred and twenty-one just past, upon which we have been reviewing today with thankful hearts.

Standing today surrounded by the sacred walls of this "Old Home Church" to which so many of her children have gathered together on this, the 11th of August, 1929, celebrating another home-coming to the Mother Church, hallowed by memories of parents, loved ones and friends no longer with us, memory throws upon the screen many scenes from the past associated with this "Mother Church". We can never forget her; there will ever be tender ties binding us to this spot. This sanctuary of God has been, and ever will be, a shrine of devotion for her children, a lighthouse to shine upon life's troubled seas, and a refuge for her children in times of despair.

Summing it all up—this wonderful history of Dials Church; her distinguished organization, and her one hundred and twenty-one years of on-going progress, over which so many of her children have been looking back upon with thankful hearts today, I feel that the sacredness of the place, the hour, the beauty that is here, the peace, the memories of the past, the visions of the future, all suggest this fitting close, to be found in Exodus the 12th Chapter and 14th verse:

"And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever."

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APPENDAGE

Martin Dial was the youngest son of Henry Arthur Dial and Isabel Hastings Dial. He was born in the "Old Country", and was of Scotch-Irish stock.

He was just a small boy when his parents reached the shores of Virginia, landing on the same spot, known and distinguished today in Virginia, as the "Dial Landing".

He was a private soldier in the Revolutionary War, for which service he received a large tract of land lying on both sides of Rabun Creek (in Laurens County, South Carolina).

He was for some time with Marion and Sumter, and was in many of the skirmishes in which they achieved deeds and successes deserving of more honor than has been given them in South Carolina history.

Martin Dial married Chrystie Abercromby, the granddaughter of James Abercromby, Adjutant General in Colonial times, serving in South Carolina from 1732-1742.

The children of Martin Dial and Chrystie Abercromby Dial were:

John Hastings Dial—married the daughter of Gideon Thomason;

Isaac Dial—Married the daughter of Gideon Thomason;

Colvill Dial—married Lidia Eastwood;

Martin Dial;

Jonathan Dial;

William Dial—married Hannah Hellams;

Hannah Dial—married Capt. John Armstrong, from whom the many families bearing the name of Armstrong, or related to the Armstrong family, are descended.

